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SUBJECT: GHANI SAYS STABILITY OBTAINED WITH BALLOTS, NOT BOMBS

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Classified by Ambassador Francis Ricciardone; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. Summary: Ambassador Eikenberry met with former Finance Minister and presidential candidate Ashraf Ghani on February 23, 2010 to discuss his views on the military operation in Marjah, the plans for the Peace Jirga and the Kabul Conference, and other issues. Ghani expressed skepticism that the coalition military effort alone would create lasting stability, emphasizing the need to focus instead on sub-national governance. Ghani said he will support Kabul Conference planning by conducting a country-wide assessment to identify the "drivers" of instability in each district, and developing a tailored plan for each district to mitigate those drivers (thus mirroring our District Delivery Program). Ghani described the risks associated with the Peace Jirga, and recommended limiting its objective to endorsing a few broad principles. Ghani also shared his thoughts on working effectively with President Karzai (keep it simple), the presidential decree on electoral reform that nationalizes the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) (do not fight it), and other political issues (e.g., improving Parliament, influencing powerbrokers, etc.) End summary.

It's Not About Marjah

¶2. (C) Ghani warned against focusing only on military successes, commenting that such operations at best provide temporary security. Promoting democracy and governance at the sub-national level is more important than bombing. He acknowledged, however, that improved security is important to stability. Ghani believes the Taliban are gearing up for major instability operations. "The population is caught in a squeeze," he said. "They are terrified of both the Taliban and the Afghan government." One positive outcome of Marjah, however, is that people now take the threat of force seriously and they will take seriously the choice between force and reintegration, he stated.

Ghani Approach to Stability: Ballots Not Bombs

¶3. (U) Ghani said he will help organize the Kabul Conference, currently scheduled for late May 2010. He is unofficially collaborating with Independent Directorate of Local Government (IDLG) Director General Jelani Popal on sub-governance planning that is already underway as part of the IDLG-led District Delivery Working Group. Ghani said the plan is to develop a tailored approach for every district in the country, starting with eight or nine districts in Helmand Province. Ghani will determine what is needed to maintain or improve stability in each district and then create clusters of three to five districts. Within these clusters, Ghani will assist the IDLG by mapping networks, and identifying linkages to facilitate service delivery, share resources, and improve governance. (Note: the USG is supporting this Afghan effort through the District Delivery Program (DDP), which is in the final stages of refinement. End note.)

¶4. (U) Ghani explained the importance of identifying young provincial leaders, and including their voices at the Kabul Conference. He supported the Embassy effort to establish a Civil Service Institute in Helmand, agreeing that it will build the capacity of young leaders to build a qualified civil service cadre.

15. (U) Ghani said his team will be 98 percent Afghan. He requested Embassy assistance to obtain the services of two Afghan-Americans for four weeks: Mohammed Kalimi from University of California, and Tariq Finawi, formerly an Afghan Ministry of Finance Deputy Minister now working for the California Department of Agriculture.

16. (U) Ghani suggested establishing bi-weekly teleconferences with think tanks in the U.S. (e.g., Atlantic Council, Brookings Institution, CSIS, USIP, and Center for New American Security).

Peace Jirga: Risky But Necessary

17. (C) Ghani called the Peace Jirga planned in April "risky," on the grounds that it could take on too much, may not be legitimate, and ultimately could fail, thereby undermining reconciliation efforts. Recognizing that the event will proceed despite these concerns, he urged the USG to support it. He cautioned against spending large sums on the jirga, as it will "explode." To ensure success, the jirga's objective must be clear. He recommended choosing a few broad principles to be endorsed. Ghani said he is willing to play a role as the chairman, if asked by President Karzai.

And a Few Parting Words of Advice

18. (C) Ghani shared his thoughts and advice on several political issues:

-- When working with Karzai, provide limited, clear options, not ultimatums. Break complex initiatives into smaller "100 day plans."

-- Karzai believes he understands the South, but does not. Ghani expressed concern that Karzai has surrounded himself with a small group of bad advisors.

-- Minister of Interior Atmar is currently weak because Karzai humiliates him daily. Ghani claims that Atmar wants to quit, as does Wardak (presumably referring to MOD Abdul Rahim Wardak, not Minister of Education Farouk Wardak).

(-- On Karzai's recent controversial Electoral Complaints Commission decree, Ghani said that trying to get a few international members into the commission is "not worth the fight." Karzai will not bend, and few Afghans will stand with the international community.

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-- Former Afghan President and current powerbroker and Jamiat party leader Burhanuddin Rabbani's goal is to subvert the reconciliation process to embarrass Karzai.

-- On influencing powerbrokers, the international community needs to set clear boundaries. The first actor to violate a boundary should be "severely sanctioned."

-- On the Parliament, Ghani said the problem is a lack of political elite. Karzai needs to somehow identify and support the election of 150 qualified people in the Parliament. They will then outnumber and successfully outmaneuver the rest.

-- "The U.S. should avoid praising programs or officials without vetting them with the local population first." For example, Ghani pointed to statements of praise made for an agriculture program in Helmand (NFI), which he alleged was widely considered to be corrupt by the local population.

-- "Do not focus on the personalities; rather, focus on strengthening weak institutions."

-- "Marginalize powerbrokers over time, to allow new actors to emerge."

EIKENBERRY